E-Learning Step One: Strategy
By Darin Hartley

Dell Learning = Learning + Access + Technology + Leverage – Cost – Time – Touches

For any major initiative, there should be a set of overarching principles to guide its implementation and progress. All new technology-enabled learning solutions considered by Dell Learning should strive to increase user access and technology use, leverage technology across the organization, cost less, take less time, and take fewer touches to implement. If not, other solutions will be considered.

Background

Dell Learning realized the need to use technology to leverage training's impact and delivery velocity early. As staff continued to ramp exponentially and a plethora of new products and services were developed, the necessity for alternative training delivery methods became overwhelming. Technology-enabled learning solutions started appearing at Dell as early as fiscal year 1997. But there was never a clear strategy on how to develop, implement, and manage technology-enabled learning. Early this year, Dell formed a team to focus on building a strategy to guide and support new technology-enabled learning systems at Dell.

The team began by reviewing the benefits of technology-enabled learning.

Increased learner control. The learner controls a variety of factors associated with the technology-enabled learning process. He or she can access the learning at a variety of times, navigate through learning in a non-linear fashion, and bypass unnecessary or redundant knowledge and skills with early feedback and assessment tools.

Fast access. Time and space resources limit traditional classroom events. For example, it could take months to perform new software application rollouts where 5,000 people must be trained. However, a technology-enabled solution avoids the PC lab backlog by simultaneously delivering training across the organization. Examples of this benefit at Dell include new hire orientation, new hire sales training, and online legal briefings.

Performance support tools. Many technology-enabled learning solutions transition naturally to on-the-job performance support tools. Reduced time away form the job. Every hour spent in the classroom increases the opportunity costs associated with staff being away form the workplace, and travel time is nonproductive. Staff stay connected to the job when they take training from their desktops, on the shop floor, or on portables.

Learning delivered when it's needed. Technology-enabled learning can be used in small chunks, when needed, over time.

Increased availability. Because staff doesn't wait until an instructor or class is available, more learning interventions are available.

Build a strategy

Review success. In determining any operational strategy, it's beneficial to start with a look at the current landscape and review successful projects, activities, relationships, and solutions. An analysis of these successes can identify common threads of excellence and best practices to use in future implementations.

Build relationships. In the past, Dell Learning implemented new learning technologies on their own. Because software engineering and development of detailed functional requirements specifications are not a core competence of Dell Learning, mistakes were made. The strategy team must build better relationships with IT, Human Resource Information Management (HRIM), Human Resource Systems Management (HRSM), Dell Interactive, Legal, and Global Information Protection (GIP). Members of Dell Learning Corporate—and regional training groups—will involve IT at the conception stage to ensure that all infrastructure, hardware, software, and security issues are addressed prior to starting the project. Several members of the HRIM and HRSM teams will routinely attend biweekly strategy team meetings.

Track, measure, and report. Capture data that assesses the effectiveness of technology enabled-learning solutions, including

- data about learners such as badge number, manager name, business segment, and job title
- length of time spent learning, and the number of times each tool is used
- user navigation
- how people are finding the tools
- chargeback data
- assessment results
- user sessions for Web-Based solution
- freshness dates of all content and Web sites, with content owners identified
- rollup reporting for all courses by manager, job title, business segment, and function

Don't use technology for everything. Not all knowledge, skills, or attitudes can be taught via a single medium or method. Technology-enabled learning should never be implemented for the sake of using technology: Technology is a tool or a medium, not the message. Examples of when not to use technology include getting people to practice nontechnology-based skills, team or relationship building exercises, and routine reinforcement of learning. Examples of when to use technology include when you need to get information to a mass group or very quickly, as pre- and post-work for classroom instruction, or when the content is technology-based.

Invest in infrastructure. Many of the applications and systems aren't supported by IT systems and require large network bandwidth and dedicated servers. Moving forward requires an enterprise-wide support of investment in necessary hardware, software, and network technology. In the interim, Dell

Learning will continue to push the envelope on what we can add, in the hopes of driving change in baseline computer configuration.

Recognize user limits to change. The Dell Learning Strategy team recognizes a fundamental barrier: People are more comfortable with classroom learning. Historically, formal learning experiences have occurred in a classroom, whether at grammar school, college, graduate work, or on the job. Employees are comfortable with sitting in a room and having someone "pour" prescriptive and pre-formulated learning into them. Learners don't need to be aware of how to learn -- they only need to exercise short term memory to pass assessment tests. For most, new self-directed learning initiatives are uncomfortable, if not painful. This will be an issue that we will grapple with consistently in the near future. The key is in knowing that this problem exists and will continue to exist.

Work with existing IT standards. IT infrastructure requirements are complex and unique. Most off-the-shelf products can't be readily integrated into Dell's system. Any new projects initiated by Dell must go through a thorough software development lifecycle process and be sanctioned as IT-supported projects or we run the risk of nonsupport from IT. Because new projects must coexist on IT production servers and have support from IT and the Client Assistance Center, they must be in compliance with Global Information Protection and other security and legal requirements, have appropriate licensing -- for desktop or enterprise, and be Y2K certifiable.

Develop and add to baseline technology. The baseline technology we will need includes

- threaded discussion tools
- Internet paging tools such as Microsoft Internet Messenger
- knowledge management system
- video and audio streaming capabilities and video servers
- robust management and tracking system for online learning
- virtual service representatives (chatterbots)
- best practices database

As technology develops, we expect this list to grow.

Perform cost-benefit analysis. Because technology develops rapidly, hardware and software longevity -- or brevity -- can be expensive. Must-have technology today is ancient history tomorrow. Cost benefit analyses should be applied to any buying opportunity.

Professional development for learning staff. The new learning model that lends itself heavily to alternative and technology-enabled learning requires new skill sets in development, implementation, and maintenance phases. As subject matter experts don't always facilitate learning well, the traditional classroom-based instructor will need skills specific to the technology-enabled learning field.

Market. The common thread running through most successful programs is sound communication. Because there will be resistance to new learning methods, a strong effort must be made to communicate benefits and motivate users. Communicate successes early and often up and down the organization.

Inform staff early of any future and current learning opportunities, and how it will benefit them. It is important that the end users of technology-enabled learning solutions have easy-to-use feedback systems to communicate desired improvements in the content and methods used; report any changes made that are based on user feedback. A marketing person should have, at least, partial responsibility for this effort.

Partner. In order for us to succeed in the technology-enabled learning arena, there are many key people we need to establish and maintain relationships with, including IT, HRIT, HRSM, GIP, Legal, Procurement, DLTS, Business Unit IT organizations (including global partners), Business Partner Subject Matter Experts (including global SMEs), and qualified suppliers.

How to manage

Technology-enabled learning will need to be analyzed, designed, developed, implemented, and evaluated by a set of dedicated resources. We need a robust tracking system, quality assurance processes, and technical support of various stakeholder organizations within Dell. The following areas should be managed by Dell Learning:

- researching new technologies
- implementation and maintenance planning
- tracking and reporting of usage and effectiveness
- fiscal operations
- quality assurance including automated ways to help ensure content is fresh
- ROI data
- customer education. The learner has considerations to help manage his or her own learning. The following criteria must be in place for learners to manage and create their own learning experiences.
- ready access to the learning
- support from direct and higher-level management
- education about how to use
- self-efficacy training and/or communication
- opportunity to practice and make mistakes
- tracking system
- feedback system
- a roadmap

Offering technology-enabled learning solutions is the right thing for Dell to do. Technology-enabled learning increases the variety of course offerings and learning opportunities, creates greater impact faster, allows offering flexibility, and empowers the learner. However, there are many challenges: cultural and learning style issues; change management; infrastructure; and hardware, software, and network constraints. This strategy is designed to establish a framework or implementing technology-enabled learning at Dell. It is meant to be an organic living document that will change as Dell's learning environment.

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